



John Lewis Smith copy c 1870 From the Wells Smith Family Album

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt

January 29 2026

A photograph of John Smith appears in the Wells Smith Family Album on page 9, fourth image of four. At first glance it is faded and unremarkable: a formal studio portrait, composed and typical of the period. The details are difficult to make out. The photograph is in poor condition—visibly degraded—and reads not as a pristine original but as a copy. Most striking are the eyes, which have been carefully drawn in by hand with a very fine pen. Against the pale, flattened surface of the image, the darkened eyes are immediately noticeable and slightly unsettling. The photograph asks questions.

Viewed alongside the other photographs on the album page, the image takes on a clearer context. The surrounding portraits—John and Esther Smith and their infant child—place this photograph within a family grouping rather than isolating it as a standalone likeness. Nineteenth-century albums were often arranged deliberately, and it is clear that this image was preserved as part of a family record.

This image survives in multiple known copies: one preserved within the Wells Smith family album and two held today by the Oregon Historical Society. These are not identical reproductions. Each shows subtle differences, particularly in the hand-drawn or reinforced eye and facial details. Each version has been rendered slightly differently, suggesting individual handling rather than exact duplication. All known copies of this photograph appear to have been produced in Texas. Why an image later preserved in an Oregon family album originated there remains unclear.

The photograph itself is clearly a copied image rather than a first-generation print. Based on clothing and styling, the reproduction likely dates no more than a decade after the original was made. Cartes-de-visite photographs of this kind were portable and exchangeable. They functioned not only as keepsakes but as recognizable representations—objects that could circulate beyond the immediate family.

The clothing style in the portrait adds another layer. John Smith's dress closely resembles that seen in portraits of other men active in early Oregon's political, military, and civic life. In particular, the distinctive tie and rigid collar style appears repeatedly among figures associated with the Applegate family and related territorial leadership. This was not a universal fashion of

the era, nor was it especially common among younger men. It appears most frequently among an older generation involved in land claims, provisional governance, and the early formation of Oregon's institutions. What may appear severe, theatrical, or even flamboyant today likely read at the time as conventional markers of seriousness and standing within a relatively small and interconnected circle.

After arriving in Oregon in 1853 via the Elliott Cutoff—one of the most disastrous overland journeys of the period—John Smith and his family settled in Douglas County in close proximity to his brother Robert Smith and established Applegate land claims. Robert had traveled west with the Applegates in 1843 and later married a daughter of Charles Applegate, creating a direct family connection. By the time this photograph was circulating, the Smiths were no longer newcomers on the margins but were embedded within an existing network of kinship, land ownership, and shared experience in the Umpqua Valley.

Seen in that light, the photograph resists being read as a simple portrait. Its repetition through multiple copies, its altered condition, and its preservation within the family album all suggest a purpose beyond mere likeness.

The value of this photograph lies not in what it definitively explains, but in what it invites us to notice. It asks to be examined closely, compared carefully, and understood as part of a larger story about family, affiliation, and memory in early Oregon.

.

Oregon Historical Society. *John Smith*, cartes-de-visite photograph, mid-19th century. Two variant copies. Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oregon. Public domain.

Oregon Historical Society. *Lindsay Applegate*, cartes-de-visite photograph, mid-19th century. Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oregon. Public domain.

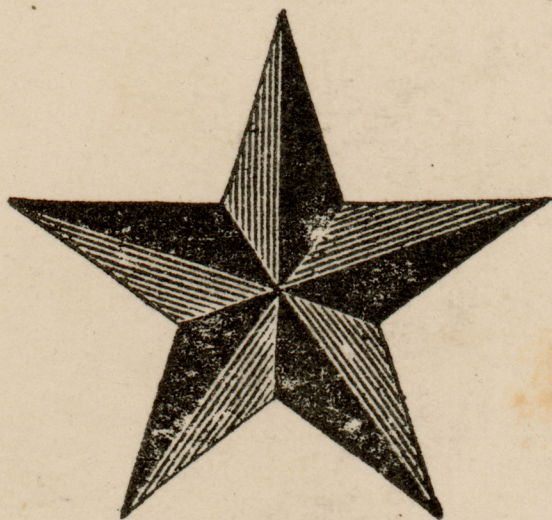
Gaston, Joseph, and George H. Himes. *The Centennial History of Oregon, 1811–1912*. Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912. Portrait of Lindsay Applegate. New York Public Library copy; digitized by the Internet Archive. Public domain.

Wells Smith Family Album, photo 4, page 9. Private family collection. Shared for non-commercial use only.



FROM

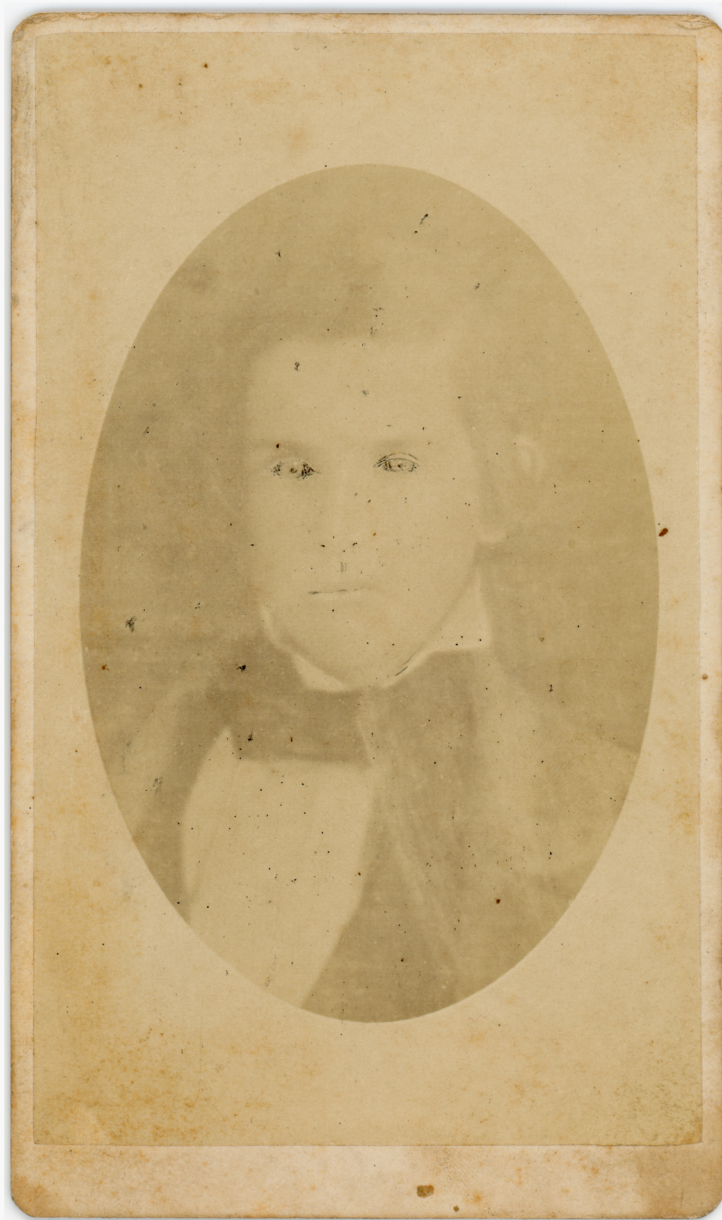
P. F. GOBEN'S



Fine Art Gallery

HOUSTON ST.,

SHERMAN, TEXAS.



John Smith — Wells Smith Family Album



John Smith — Oregon Historical Society collection, Copy 1



John Smith — Oregon Historical Society collection, Copy 2

At higher magnification, small but telling differences appear in the eyes and facial details, indicating individual hand retouching across copies.



Esther Wells Smith c 1870



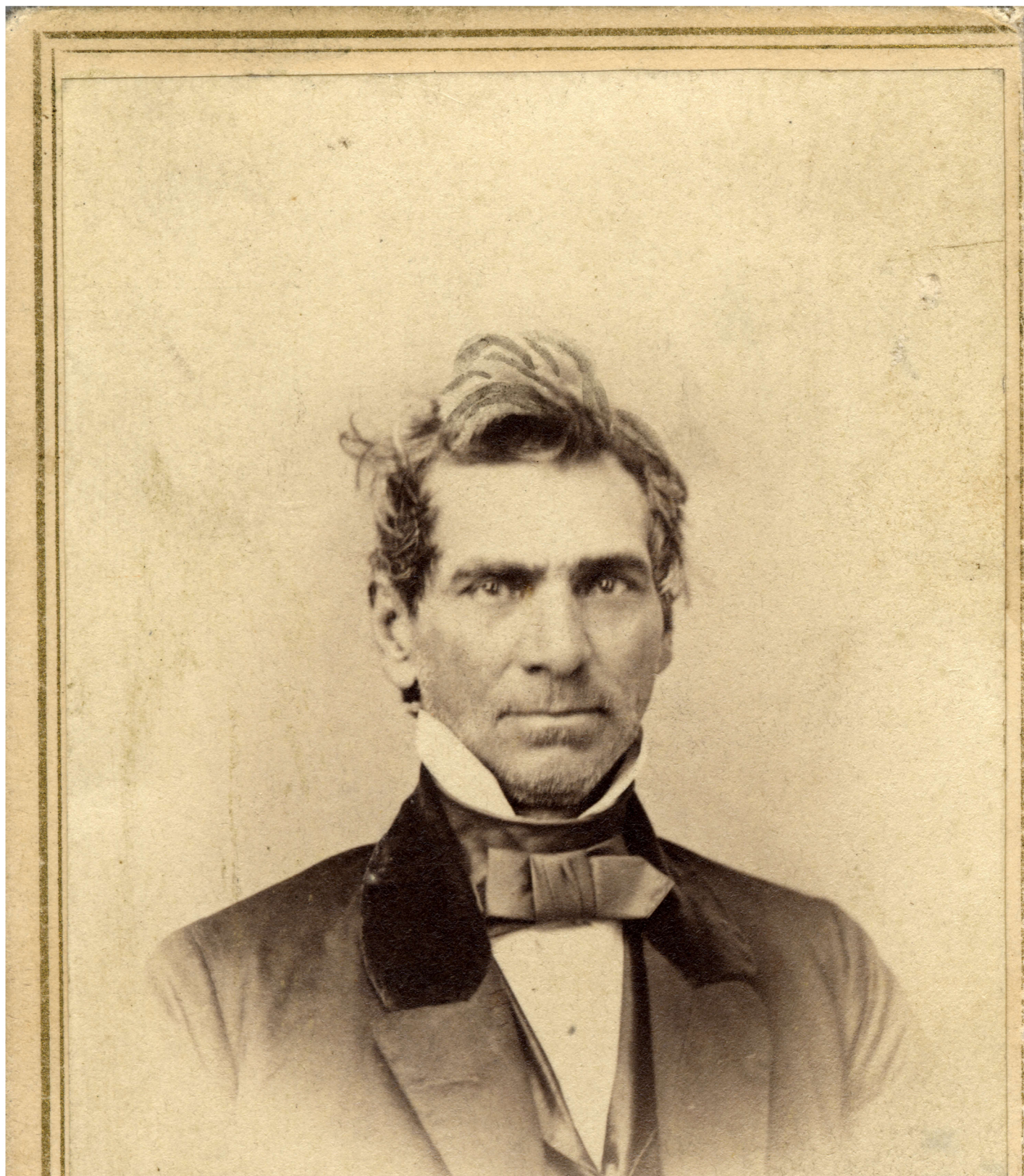
John Lewis Smith c 1870



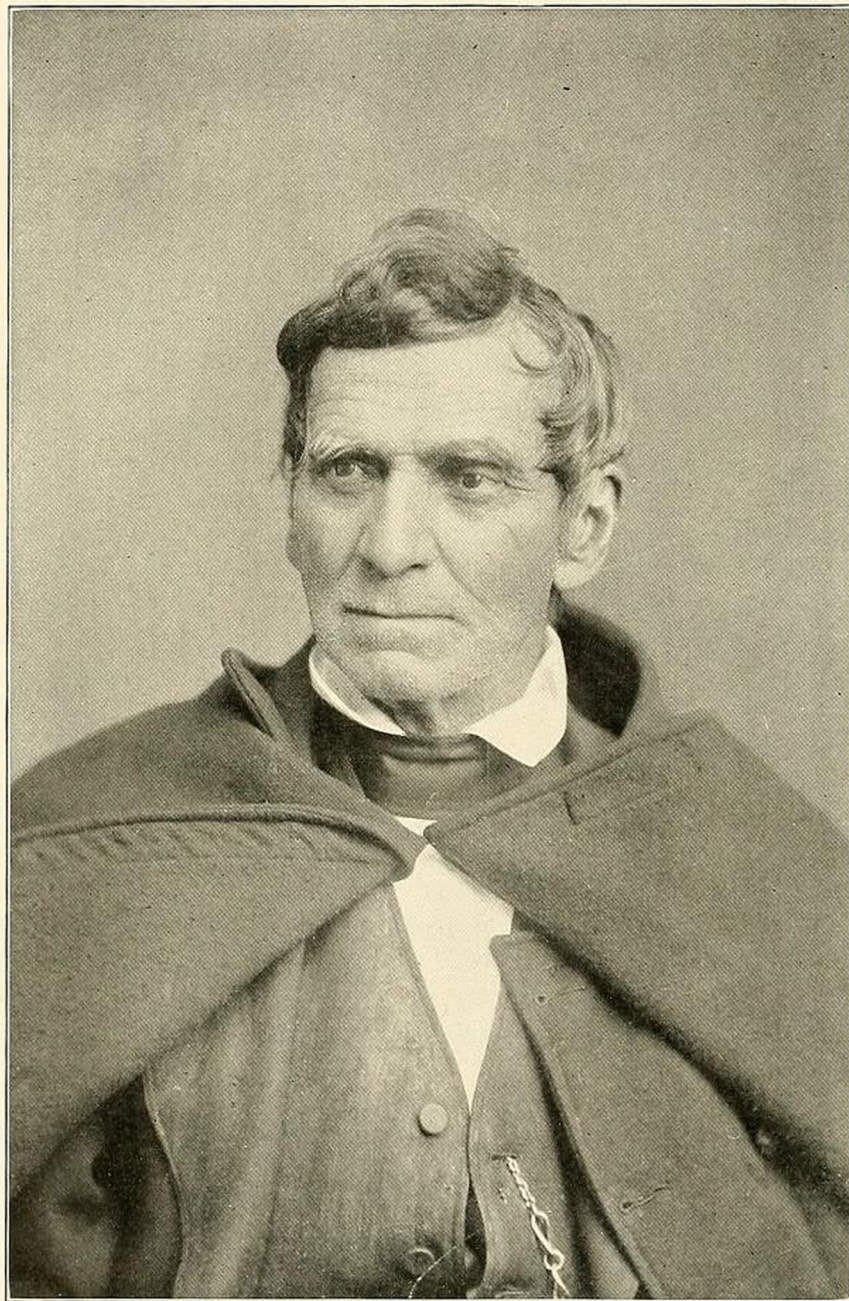
Lewis Nolan Smith, infant, c 1871



John Lewis Smith copy c 1870
Original photograph likely late 1860s



Lindsay Applegate — Oregon Historical Society Collection



LINDSAY APPLEGATE

A locator of the Applegate Trail into Southern Oregon, 1845